

## *School Communities, Historical Narratives and Reconciliation in Eastern Slavonia*

Borislava Manojlovic<sup>1</sup>

*Discourses, historical memories and traumas that emerged from the processes of Croatian state and nation formation, war and transition towards peace, marked tectonic changes in status and relationships between Croat and Serb communities. Even sixteen years after the war has ended, stereotyping, absence of crossgroup friendships and lack of intergroup interaction highlights the divide between the two communities. This study seeks to explore how communities in the region of Eastern Slavonia (Croatia) make sense of the past in a post-conflict context drawing from Foucault (1972), Fairclough (1993) and Tilly's (1999) ideas of discourses, social interaction and contention. Specifically, this study focuses on school communities that are positioned at the outposts or recipient end of the educational system, which has been the locus of clashes between official discourse of the past mainstreamed from above and different ethnic interpretations of history on the ground. My question is how those communities view contentious issues about the past, how this translates into their relationships with each other, and how we can learn from those communities about alternative and locally-owned approaches to history education that would lead to reconciliation and sustainable peace.*

### **Introduction**

The conflict between Croats and Serbs in Croatia has not only been plagued by intermittent outbursts of deadly violence that date back to the WWII, but also by persistence of the *negative peace* which, as defined by Galtung (1975), refers to the “absence of direct violence while other factors such as restoration of relationships, interethnic collaboration and creation of equitable and inclusive social systems that constitute *positive peace* are lacking”. Discourses, historical memories and traumas that emerged from the processes of Croatian state and nation formation, war and transition towards peace brought about significant change in status and

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<sup>1</sup> Borislava Manojlovic is a PhD Candidate and Drucie French Cumbie Fellow at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University. She has previously worked with the UN and the OSCE in Croatia and Kosovo. Her current research focuses on historical narratives, education and peacemaking. Her most recent work “UN Mediation Experiences and Peace Processes in Africa” was presented at the ASA conference in Washington DC, 17 November 2011.

relationships between Croat and Serb communities, particularly in Eastern Slavonia region<sup>2</sup> that underwent some of the worst fighting and atrocities during the 1991-95 war. Pre-war good neighborly relationships have been replaced by segregation, stereotyping and lack of interethnic interaction that persist, even sixteen years after the war has ended. Grievances and traumas of the war are reflected in historical discourses that tend to be contentious and are used to perpetuate divisions among communities. It is not rare that certain public events such as anniversaries, public holidays, political rallies and commemorations invoke those discourses to increase tension, mobilize nationalist sentiments and provoke deep social cleavages. Such discourses carry within them seeds of conflict shaped by historical events such as collective memory of atrocities, battles and ethnic cleansing that tend to be *virulent* (Sandole, 2002), emotionally loaded and easily mobilized in the moments of crisis.

History is heavily embedded in the narrative politics, i.e. in different and competing versions of the same historical events that are used as tools to assert, maintain or challenge action, status and legitimacy. The struggle over the meanings of the past is really a struggle for either maintaining or challenging legitimacy that ultimately translates into having or not having more access to benefits, status, agency and freedom. In the context of Croatia, there are two major ethnic groups that have struggled over the access to resources, power and legitimacy throughout the history. Croats and Serbs had a status of nations within former Yugoslavia, which gave them similar access to political and economic resources. In the newly independent Croatia, Serbs' status has dwindled to that of a minority, and almost two thirds of the Serb population was exiled from Croatia in military operations Storm and Lightning. Historical discourses have been

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<sup>2</sup> Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium is a region in Eastern Croatia where Croats and Serbs live side-by-side. According to 2001 census, the region was populated by 57.5 % of Croats, and about 33% of Serbs (Croatian National Census, 2001). The region was under the UN protection from 1996 to 1998 when it was peacefully reintegrated into Croatia.

constantly used and abused in meaning making process around this major historical change that drastically affected lives, identities, economic standing, views and relationships of people in a new national, regional and global context.

While much of the existing research in the field of memory studies has focused on the production of history narratives through textbooks, media or cultural expressions etc., it tends to overlook the audience, or, *receivers* in the process of meaning production (Griswold, 1994). This study seeks to explore how people at the grassroots make sense of the past, how communities within the region of Eastern Slavonia deal with and navigate through discourses of contentious past and, particularly, the recent war of independence. The aim of this study is to learn from the school communities, positioned at the outposts or recipient end of the educational system, about alternative and locally-owned approaches to history education that would contribute to reconciliation and sustainable peace.

### **Discourses as practices and interactive processes of meaning making**

In this study, the view of discourses as practices as seen by Foucault (1972), Fairclough (1993) and Hall (1996), is of utmost importance for understanding how discourses influence and shape individual actions and intergroup relationships at the grassroots. For Foucault, discourse is about production of knowledge through language. While physical objects and actions exist separately from discourse, we can only have knowledge about them if they have meaning and it is discourse that gives them meaning (Foucault, 1972). All social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence our actions (Hall, 2001: 73). Although Foucault included the subject in his theory and in his later works gave him/her a certain reflexive awareness, he still maintained that even when “...subjects produce particular texts, they are still operating within

the limits of particular discursive formation” ... they are always ...”subjected to discourse” (Hall, 2001: 79). While discourses give meaning to what we do and how we make sense of the world, there is a lack of knowledge to which extent certain discourses or elements of those discourses have influenced perceptions and relationships between groups and individuals in the postconflict societies. There is a gap in knowledge about the reception of discourses at the grassroots and if there is a space for subject’s agency.

While Foucault emphasizes the primacy of structure over agency, Fairclough’s critical discourse theory allows certain space for agency of individuals and groups, which is closer to the view of discourse in this study. Fairclough argues that the balance between the subject as ideological effect and the subject as active agent is a variable, which depends upon social conditions (Fairclough, 1993: 91). If one focuses only on production and creation of discourses, one would be taking a single-sided perspective, which would not answer the questions of how the students are dealing with a particular discourses in their classrooms and communities, or how this shapes their view of the Other. That is, “newspapers, television programming, and textbooks tell us what communication and academic elites believe about the past; they do not necessarily tell us what ordinary people believe, or how they feel about what they believe” (Schwartz, Fukuoka, and Takita-Ishii 2005: 267). By exploring how communities at the grassroots view and make sense of the contentious past, we will be able to develop deeper understanding on how to use context-specific and local knowledge to promote peace in postconflict societies. A bottom-up approach is needed to promote peace from within the affected societies and it requires changing hearts and minds of the local people to get them to work for peace and reconciliation (Lederach, 1997).

Tilly (1999) draws attention to the need in social sciences to reconcile three contradictory

features of social life: the recurrence of a limited set of causal processes in a wide variety of situations, the incessant improvisation in social interaction and the great weight of particular histories, congealed as particular cultural configurations, on social interaction. He argues that “social interaction generates stories that justify and facilitate further social interaction, within limits set by the stories people already share as a consequence of previous interactions” (Tilly, 1999). There is a limited and recurrent repertoire of stories that facilitate interaction and serve particular function and there is a clear gap in social sciences in how discourses and stories affect “our conduct of social life” (Tilly, 1999). However, as Margaret Somers argues “there is no reason to assume a priori that people with similar attributes will share common experiences of social life, let alone be moved to common forms and meanings of social action, unless they share similar narrative identities and relational settings” (Somers, 1992). Therefore, actions or agency of the subject should not be explored as abstractions but through their linkages to discourses that determine their social and historical embeddedness. It is through exploration of discourses in interaction at the grassroots level that we can determine how macro structural processes operate at the micro level and what influence they have on individual’s perceptions and agency.

### **Contentious historical discourses and school communities in post-conflict contexts**

The report written by Cole and Barslou (2006) provides a significant insight into the challenges of history education in divided post-conflict societies. The authors reflect on ethnic segregation or integration of schools as a common structural aspect in educational systems of post-conflict societies. Cole and Barslou (2006) claim that “approaches that emphasize students’ critical thinking skills and expose them to multiple historical narratives can reinforce democratic and peaceful tendencies in transitional societies emerging from violent conflict”. The importance

of education for securing long-term peace is also emphasized by Eric Davis (2005) who argues for enabling teachers and students to work as agents for social change in Iraq. Imad Harb (2008) points out that professors represent the intellectual capital of a country and a leading force towards reform. There is a clear gap in knowledge about the processes of meaning making within school communities and how youth's views about the contentious past are shaped.

An education system in postconflict societies may serve as “a battleground and a repository of conflict where different communities compete over history and the society's narrative” (All et al, 2007: 328) and youths often find themselves in the midst of such conflicts. An extensive research on interethnic relations in Vukovar (Eastern Slavonia) conducted by Čorkalo Biruški and Ajduković (2008), has shown that negative perceptions toward the other ethnic group are not only shaped in classrooms but also reflect deep division and cleavages that persist within school communities (Čorkalo-Biruški & Ajduković, 2008: 189). Therefore, there is a need to explore the role of school communities that include teachers, parents and peers, in shaping youth's perceptions about contentious past (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Coleman, 1990; Seginer, 2003).

### **Approach to the subject matter**

This study is, theoretically and ideologically, tied with memory studies as well as postmodernist, critical and conflict resolution theories. Memory studies have looked at the “the structures that enable the societies to hand down beliefs about the past from one generation to the next, the purposes for which those beliefs are mobilized, their nature and shape, and the ways they change over time” (Seixas, 2004: 5). Historical narratives do not only serve to construct collective identities as part of nation building projects, but they also influence present and future

collective projects, relationships and actions as well as individual commitments. The features of narratives may include a story line with a particular *selection and ordering of events* that are *causally linked* over time, protagonists that undergo various trials and whose *identities* appear to be *coherent and continuous*, *demarcation signs* that indicate beginning and ending, and conclusions imbued with certain *valued endpoints* (Gergen, 1998, 2005). Even though we can trace this basic structure in the historical narratives of the two ethnic groups in Eastern Slavonia, these narratives are much more complex in realities on the ground, and offer to the keen observer, an elaborate and rich picture about protagonists, their relationships and the context they live in.

By examining more closely the structure of these narratives by means of thematic discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherel, 1987; Burman & Parker, 1993), this study will seek traces of the official historical narrative in the respondents individual stories to see how much they comply or deviate from the new national historical narrative. Through discursive interaction between official historical discourses and individual stories on the ground, we will get insight into the *living memory*, into what is legitimate and correct according to the participants, and how this influences their views of Selves, the relevant Other and the relationship between the two. Methodologically, this research constitutes an attempt to introduce dynamic interactive processes of meaning making that take place at the grassroots level into the study of historical discourses and their influence on people's perceptions. Wills suggests that "the reading or use of cultural texts and practices is rather a social ...process involving the ...construction of meaning, meaning that is located in the interaction between cultural texts, context, conditions and people" (Wills, 1994: 367; see also Epstein, 1998). Experiences from Eastern Slavonia suggest that there is a need to examine this interaction between communities and larger discourses, which can

contribute to our understanding not only how macro discourses about past influence practices, meanings and relationships at the grassroots, but also provide an opportunity to identify alternative ways of dealing with the current and past contention.

## **Methodology**

To gain deeper insights into the subject matter, I intend to examine the features of the key case that would contribute to the understanding of the current relationships between the two ethnic groups in Eastern Slavonia. The case study format will provide a space for a more holistic and detailed analysis as well as comparison of the processes and dynamics that are taking place at the level of school communities. The analysis will start by looking into the history textbooks as primary sources of the official historical narrative in Croatia, which would enable examination of the traces of that narrative in the individual stories of the participants. The exploration of participants' narratives will be done by looking into their structure, common features, consistency, deviations and variety of themes and storylines appropriated by two collectivities, which would open a window for comparison with other cases. Eventually, this study will suggest some propositions for improving approaches to history education in the context of Croatia based on the communal experiences and knowledge.

## **Participants**

Purposive sampling is used for the relevant groups of subjects within school communities - students (4th high school graders and recent graduates, age 18-20), school teachers and parents. Purposive selection of people or groups of interest that possess knowledge or offer variety of perspectives about the studied phenomenon, may contribute to elaborating and deepening of initial



analysis (Patton, 1990). Triangulation of data sources will also contribute to the validity of study. The units of analysis will be individual representatives of two major ethnic groups in Eastern Slavonia, Serbs and Croats that were accessed through the network of acquaintances from the former conflict area in Eastern Slavonia who had previously worked and conducted workshops with students. Ethical considerations are especially important when dealing with vulnerable population such as youth. Making sure that the interviewed participants understood the nature of inquiry was of the greatest importance. Guarantee of privacy and informed consent, has been discussed with all participants in advance.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The researcher conducted thematic discourse analysis of 60 semi-structured interview transcripts with youths (40), parents (12) and teachers (8). She also conducted thematic discourse analysis of history textbooks as primary sources that contain official/academic versions of the recent historical narrative. The researcher's objective in analyzing history textbooks was to identify the structure of official and mainstream historical narratives, which would enable examination of the traces of those narratives in the individual answers of the participants. By establishing structure of wider historical discourse, we will be able to see how such discourses operate on the ground, if they are modified, challenged or fully accepted and how people's views of themselves and their relevant others vary in relation to their historical narrative.

### **Official narratives of war and divisions in Eastern Slavonia**

Based on the document analysis of several history textbooks<sup>3</sup> and supplementary

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<sup>3</sup> The textbooks analyzed for the purposes of this study are as follows: 1) Erdelja, Kresimir & Stojakovic, Igor. 2009. *Koraci kroz vrijeme IV*. Zagreb: Skolska knjiga (History textbook for the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in

educational materials, we can see several major tendencies or themes emerging in the official discourses related to the war of independence in Croatia, such as: *anti-fascism vs. fascism, trauma and threat to national identity*. For understanding of the current discourses related to the war of independence, it was necessary to include the references to the WWII events, which are inextricably interconnected.

### *Anti-fascism vs. fascism*

Discourses of the new Croatian state as having been built on antifascist foundations exist side-by-side discourses that promote rehabilitation of Croatian Ustasha fascist imagery and language,<sup>4</sup> which is specifically attached to the repertoire of current practices related to the “sites of memory” (Nora, 1989), military operations and state holidays. The rehabilitation of Croatian fascist imagery and language certainly reinforces Serbs’ discourses of the new state of Croatia as an “extension” of the WWII fascist state (Volkan, 1997). The rehabilitation of the names of military ranks from the WWII fascist Croatian state such as the word ‘poglavnik’ (leader, commander) is equally used for Ante Pavelic who was Ustasa leader in the WWII, and President Franjo Tudjman. The textbooks often compare communist and fascist regimes with the tendency of equalizing their crimes and atrocities. The most obvious example is the number of victims of two most traumatic events for Serbs and Croats. During the WWII, Croatian fascist Ustasha

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higshools); 2) Agičić, Damir, Tvrtko Jakovina, Suzana Leček, Stjepan Matković & Magdalena Najbar-Agičić. 2009. Povijest 3. Zagreb: Profil (History textbook for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in higshools); 3) Samaržija, Zdenko. (2005). Hrvatska i svijet 2. Zagreb: Skolska Knjiga (History textbook for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in higshools); 4) Čokonaj, Emil, Hrvoje Petrić, Jakša Raguž, Davor Škiljan. (2005). Povijest 2: Hrvatska i svijet od kraja XVIII. do potkraj XX. Stoljeća. Zagreb: Meridijani (history textbook for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in higshools).

<sup>4</sup> See article on the celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of military operation Storm in Čavoglava, Croatia. U Čavoglavama Thompson, Bandić i rakija s likom Ante Pavelića (In Cavoglava village, Thompson, Bandic and plum brandy with the picture of Ante Pavelic)

[http://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/foto\\_u\\_cavoglavama\\_thompson\\_bandic\\_i\\_rakija\\_s\\_likom\\_ante\\_pavelica/86257.html](http://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/foto_u_cavoglavama_thompson_bandic_i_rakija_s_likom_ante_pavelica/86257.html)

regime annihilated one third of Serbian population living on its territory, around 340 000 people, primarily in the concentration camps of Jasenovac and Stara Gradiska<sup>5</sup>. The estimates of number of victims in Jasenovac, according to the history textbooks, range between 60 000 to 100 000 victims. This event is juxtaposed in the history textbooks to the atrocity committed by the Partisan communist forces that retaliated against retreating Ustasha forces near Austrian town of Bleiburg, killing up to 70 000 unarmed Ustasha soldiers. The rise of Ustasha fascist movement in Croatia is portrayed in the textbooks as a reaction to the dictatorship and oppressive nature of Serbian rule in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. An interesting observation is that the human rights and contemporary *western democratic* discourse is used in depicting the rise of the fascist movement in Croatia as a reaction to the oppressive Serbian rule, while the word ‘minorities’ is used to describe the victims of Ustasha’s rule.

### *Trauma*

Grievances and traumas of the war are reflected in historical discourses that tend to mobilize nationalist sentiments and cause social rifts. Such discourses are integral part of the public discourses as well as history textbooks. They have at its center a certain unmourned historical traumatic event that serves as a vehicle for continuation of conflict and creation of group boundaries. Vamik Volkan argues that a group’s *chosen trauma* “describes the collective memory of a calamity which befell a group’s ancestors” (Volkan, 1997: 48). Both Serbs and Croats have their own traumatic events dating back to the WWII<sup>6</sup>, which were relived during the

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<sup>5</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum about Jasenovac and Independent State of Croatia. Ushmm.org. Retrieved on 11/15/2011. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005449>

<sup>6</sup> Serbs’ trauma with regards to Croats occurred during the WWII in the form of genocide when Croatian fascist Ustasha regime annihilated one third of Serbian population in Croatia primarily in the concentration camps of Jasenovac and Nova Gradiska. On the other hand, Croatian traumatic experience came in the aftermath of WWII when partisan forces retaliated against fascist Ustasha

conflict of 1991/95. Serbs relived the trauma when ethnic cleansing of some 200 000 Serbs from Croatia took place in the aftermath of Croatian military operations Storm (Oluja) in 1995.

Croatian traumatic experience was relived when Serbia came to support Serbian minority in Croatia, which resulted in full-blown war. Since neither traumas of the WWII nor the traumas of the most recent violent conflict have been properly mourned and recognized, they are perpetuated through discourses related to particular events such as already mentioned Jasenovac and Bleiburg. As Rouhana and Bar-Tal (1998) argue, collective narratives gain its centrality in response to the political events while serving, among other functions, as a coping mechanism to strengthen the community's resolve in the face of adverse or traumatic events.

#### *Threat to national identity*

When discourses of past collective traumas are challenged by the existence of alternative discourses, those alternative discourses are perceived as a threat to the national identity that as a result becomes entrenched, more salient and often evoked to reflect the past traumas. While examining historical textbooks and related materials, I came across a history textbook supplement that was to be used in Eastern Slavonia's schools. The supplement was written by a group of authors, Snježana Koren, Magdalena Najbar-Agičić and Tvrtko Jakovina, and it presented a diverse and complex narrative about the war talking about suffering of both Serbs and Croats. This caused a public outrage and was subsequently withdrawn (Marko-Stockl, 2007). The supplement included the narrative about Serbian victims of Croatian military operations "Bljesak" (lightening) and "Oluja" (storm), as well as ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia in the aftermath of these operations. Despite the state efforts to address the interethnic

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that were massively killed in Bleiburg at Slovenian-Austrian border. These traumas have been relived and revived during the conflict of 1991/95 and they have never been properly mourned and recognized, which can explain their deep-rootedness in historical narratives.

diversity, the people on the ground were not ready to recognize historical discourses of the relevant Other because those discourses delegitimize their own perceptions of the past.

As history textbooks provide rather coherent and monochromatic narratives of collective histories of the two groups by simplifying and overusing ‘victim – victimizer’, ‘aggressor – defender’ and ‘us – them’ dichotomies, the necessity for individual stories is becoming even more apparent. We may assume that different stories emerge in diverse environments where the two groups live and interact. Whether they conform or challenge the official narrative, individual stories provide a space for multiple voices to emerge. It is important to explore perceptions that people attach to official historical discourses particularly for the purpose of finding out how people deal with contentious meanings of history and how it reflects on their views of Self and the relevant Other. As Margaret Smith (2005) points out, understanding multiperspectival nature of history and realization that different groups experience the same events differently may be more important than searching for common narratives of history, possibly imposed from the outside. Nevertheless, the school communities represent the key sites for having difficult conversations about history and exploration of how change can be introduced into the conflict cycle that would lead to sustainable peace.

## **Students**

The students were asked to choose an event from the recent history of their country that is relevant to their present life, comment why they deemed it relevant, and whether this event has any influence on their view of the Other. The events that the students chose to talk about were grouped as follows:

- 1) Homeland War/Civil War

## 2) Disintegration of Yugoslavia

## 3) Trials in the Hague Tribunal

Narratives of each of these events were analyzed and four major overall themes with subthemes were identified from the data including responses of students from both ethnic groups. Major themes that emerged from the students' narratives are as follows: *economic uncertainty, patriotism, human rights and justice, and history as 'unfinished business'*.

### *Economic Uncertainty*

One of the most frequently occurring themes in students' narratives about the War Of Independence in Croatia and its relevance for their present lives is *economic uncertainty*. 80% of the overall number of students, regardless of ethnicity, talked about the impact of war on their dire economic circumstances. While present in the narratives of 40% of the respondents of Croatian ethnicity, economic uncertainty is much more prominent with the respondents of Serbian ethnicity. Around 70 % of them point to unemployment, lack of money and monetary security as well as significantly reduced standard of living as a consequence of war. One respondent explained: "The war changed our life and everything bad came out of it. Look at us – we finished school and we don't have a job or a future." Another respondent concluded: "My parents lost their jobs in the war and could not get jobs after the Croats came back – they are old now and their pensions are hundred Euros. It is terrible what kind of conditions we live in."

### *Patriotism*

Another prominent theme is patriotism that features with almost 60 % of participants of Croatian ethnicity. This theme is imbued with variations from those that are echoing the official

discourse of the importance of Homeland war for the collective sense of self, freedom and liberation from aggression to those that imply the contradiction of actual and expected. Specifically, trauma, economic uncertainty and post-traumatic stress disorder feature as relevant subthemes related to the theme of patriotism. One of the participants states: “Before people of my age were working and having children, and here we are dealing with unemployment and PTSD.” It is noteworthy to mention the difference in characterization of war and the use of adjectives of ‘homeland’ war and ‘civil’ war. Serbs call the war ‘civil’ or ‘recent’ detaching themselves from a positive and emotional characterization of the war that contributed to the deterioration of their economic and political status, while Croats refer to the war as ‘homeland’, which is related to the official patriotic discourse of homeland, nation building and their sense of self. Metaphors of death and sickness such as “they fought in trenches and many got sick” are also associated with the patriotic discourse. Emphasis on suffering and victimhood is related to the dogmatic nature of the nation-building story that in this way becomes cemented, unquestionable and exclusive.

### *Human rights and justice*

While students belonging to Croatian ethnic group were more concerned with the theme of patriotism and the contradictions of actual and expected, the theme emerging from the narratives of 70% of students belonging to Serbian ethnic group was related to the topic of human rights and justice. Patriotism and human rights discourse are often juxtaposed and contradicting each other and this represents one of the key points of discursive contention between the two groups. There are, however, remarkable variations within the scope of this theme. The subthemes of loss, trauma and victimhood can be particularly traced in the Serb

discourse about the plight of refugees: “Because of the operation Storm, my relatives had to leave their homes in Banija and they came to live with us. They lost everything. I will never forget their faces.”

The subtheme of war-crime trials in the Hague, attached to the human rights and justice theme, emerged in the narratives of 40 % percent of respondents regardless of ethnicity. This subtheme represents another point of contention between patriotic and human rights discourses. In respondents’ narratives, there is a dissonance between the patriotic discourse exemplified in metaphors such as ‘the just war’, ‘heroic action’, ‘us - heroes’ and ‘them - aggressors’, and the human rights/justice discourse that challenges patriotic and victimhood discourses by suggesting that ‘the crimes have been perpetrated’ against the relevant Others. Both discourses of patriotism and victimhood are being questioned as the participants verbalize their experiences and acknowledge realities of the arrests of their leading political and military figures.

What is remarkable is that there were a few respondents who crossed ethnic lines and dissented from their groups’ official discourses, but those cases were indeed the researcher’s feast. Why is dissent important? It is important because peace requires dissent – a movement across ethnic lines into the realm of confusion and ambiguity. Unquestionability and absence of doubt from the patriotic and victimhood discourses suggests denial of responsibility and lack of openness for dialogue, which inhibits the peace and reconciliation to emerge. The internal struggle between patriotic and human rights discourses is evident in the statement of one of the Croatian participants: “I would not want to sound as an enemy of the state, but I see that Croatian generals are also accused of crimes so it could not have been just a defensive war.” The victimhood narrative of Serbs is challenged by one of the few Serb students pointing at the subtheme of responsibility: “We don’t hear much about the reasons for their arrest. We hear that



these arrests were a mistake and that they are heroes. Why did the process of capturing them last so long? There are many questions that our leaders cannot reply because they are part of the old establishment.”

### *History as ‘unfinished business’*

The sub-theme of war-crime trials and arrests is closely connected to the theme of history as “unfinished business”. There is a close link between the politics of the day and the recent past. Although the war has finished 16 years ago, the public is intermittently reminded of it, which causes renewed tensions, radicalization and ethnic divisions. The arrests have been done gradually, which one of the participants describes “as history in small dosages”. The view of recent history as a “constant reminder” creates the space for patriotic and human rights discourses to clash with each other. Therefore, history is by the majority of respondents, regardless of their ethnicity, seen as an “unfinished business and an ongoing process”. Another important sub-theme attached to the theme of ‘history as unfinished business’ is cross-border ties, suggesting the joint and interrelated experience of war with the neighboring countries of Bosnia and Serbia as well as the importance of regional and cross-border connections. When talking about the arrests of generals in Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia for the crimes committed in countries other than Croatia, students are echoing discourses of the political, cultural and geopolitical transnational ties that exist despite the borderlines of the newly created states.

### **Teachers and parents**

The narratives elicited from parents and teachers were grouped together to facilitate analysis of their insights on how history learning practices can be improved and how they see

their role in the process of mediating historical meanings. I have identified three major themes emerging from the narratives of teachers and parents: *regionalization and decentralization of history, integrated schools and the importance of language, and shared identity*.

### *Regionalization and decentralization of history*

One of the key themes emerging from the teachers' narratives is *regionalization and decentralization* of history teaching and history teaching materials as one of the solutions for teaching history in post-conflict contexts. It suggests that history should not only be focusing on the main contenders in a conflict, such as Serbs and Croats in the case of Eastern Slavonia, but it should include other nationalities living in the area. The teachers point to the fact that they have never had the opportunity of teaching about the histories of Roma, German, or Hungarian communities in their local contexts – the stories of minority communities are glanced over or absent from history textbooks and history classes. Neither Croats nor Serbs had an opportunity to learn about their fellow citizens' histories and roles, as if they never existed. One of the teachers stresses: "...it is through decentralizing history learning that people could introduce more complexity in history itself and people would realize that history cannot be reduced to just *us and them*". This alternative idea of introducing stories of the people that were not the main protagonists but still suffered the same ordeal of war would provide different and multiple perspectives about certain events, which would diffuse interethnic tensions and enable students to see history as a multifaceted, complex and shared system of knowledge. The stories of Roma, German and Hungarian communities are untold stories, but those nations are integral part of the region of Eastern Slavonia and its history. As one of the teachers explains: "The students should be given a chance to present stories of different nations in the conflict and that is how they would

learn how those stories intersect with the stories of their own nation. This would not only disambiguate the existing storylines and introduce complexity, but would also enable creation of a truly integrated school.”

### *Integrated schools and the importance of language*

Majority of the teachers and parents had experienced, what they call, “true integrated schools in old Yugoslavia” and they reminisce about this model of schooling with nostalgia: “When we were students, there was no mention of nationalities; we were all equal. These were different and better times”. A key theme closely related to the theme of integrated schools is the importance of language. The language has played a significant role in demarcating borders between groups and creating divisions among peoples of former Yugoslavia. The linguists were working hard on developing new languages by introducing new words, phrases and expressions so that the languages could be as different as possible. The ‘mutilation’ of language was aimed at formation of particular autonomous identities, but what they really succeeded in doing were deeper cleavages and obstacles to communication among different groups, that inhibit possibilities for establishing relationships and achieving reconciliation. The suggestion of a parent around the theme of language is that “...the students should use their own languages in school; as long as they are doing it consistently neither of the languages should be in any way discriminated against.” This does not suggest that the languages will become more problematic and ungrammatical, but it would foster respect and recognition through education in multinational and mixed contexts. One of the teachers suggested: “Students should also be encouraged to learn the languages of nations that live in their neighborhoods or nearby regions”. Thus, the minorities would feel accepted, and the idea of a truly integrated school would become

possible.

### *Shared identity*

Another important theme emerging from the narratives of parents and teachers is “shared identity”, which is closely related to the subtheme of European identity. The idea of superseding European identity and promotion of all-European values that broadens the context and encompasses different nationalities is thought of as an alternative to local nationalist tendencies. One of the teachers points out: “If we connect national and European identities we could find common ground. Through classroom and out-of-classroom activities such values should be promoted in some future civil society. European identity is very important – it is positive because we all belong to European people and we are all culturally and geographically connected. European project gives more structural and institutional security. However, the change in political agendas of the elites that are currently pro-European and democratic is enforced from outside, and does not come from the will of people. Nationalism is still dominant.”

The promise of diffusion of national hegemonic identities as a way to move forward and bring about change to the status quo and negative peace aligns with the emerging interests, new roles and relationships that are shifting focus from animosity to collaboration in a unified European space.

### *Individual sense of Selves*

The theme of importance of history for individual sense of Self appears predominantly in the discourses of parents as they make sense of their role in their children’s understanding of history. One of parents emphasizes: “People remember history differently and I think that parents

and grandparents' oral transmission of their experiences has an enormous impact on what children remember. Their stories are selective and they are so difficult to change." Collective and individual remembering is different from history, but it influences each other greatly. The stories of parents and grandparents are the stories that children are raised on and hear early in their lives. Those stories are imbued with a particular set of values, of what is just and correct, but parents also point out that as children grow, they become more exposed to other sources and influences such as the school, peers, media and the internet. One of the parents suggests: "What they hear at home is sometimes different from what they hear in school. I think it is good that children hear different opinions so that they can form their own." While the role of parents in the process of historical meaning making is very intimate and authentic, and therefore, significant, children are also exposed to different sources of historical knowledge production through mass media, Internet and association with the members of other ethnic groups. One of the subthemes and another key point of contention from the parents' point of view is the tension between history thought in school and at home. One of the parents explains: "...the books and what children learn in school is in total contrast to what we are telling them at home. There is a lack of trust and children cannot express their opinions freely in schools."

### *Critical thinking and historical bias*

Majority of teachers frame their role as facilitators of historical meanings that are based on facts and objective truth with the educational objective of developing critical thinking among their students. One of the teachers explains: "I think that the best quality of history learning can be achieved if students learn through exploration, i.e. by exploring the past themselves, and I can play the role of coordinator. History has to be based on sources and facts not on gossips,

stereotypes and stories.” Teachers’ discourse, however, points to the subthemes of lack of teaching materials related the recent history, their ideological bias and insufficient historical distance. As another teacher points out: “I think that history should be approached in a more scientific way. The same history books are used and in those books, there is only one side’s story, while the other side is presented negatively. Most of the sources that we use are questionable because there should be a time distance, a period of time should pass. At least 50 years should pass so that we could talk about history objectively. It is still early to talk about everything.” A noteworthy observation is that subtheme of the tension between history taught at home and in school is also present in teachers’ discourse. Majority of teachers suggest that this might be the reason as to why the students’ dissent and show resistance to what they are teaching: “They listen to their parents and they come to the classrooms with certain views and attitudes. Some of them resist and completely reject my teaching. They say that the books are not telling the truth. So, I concentrate on some general things – they need to know some dates like when was the formal break up of Yugoslavia, some important events and processes. We do not go into political questions. We don’t go into a deep analysis”.

### **Implications and conclusions**

Majority of student participants agreed that historical discourses do influence their view of the relevant Other and almost 50% of them stated that they do not wish to associate or participate in out-of-classroom activities with the members of the other ethnic group. The new generation of students has acquired the stories of the war, not through their own experiences, but through listening, reading and learning about the set of relationships and values that they inherit from their forefathers and are expected to carry on. However, we can see in their narratives that

they rarely replicate the official script in its entirety. Such script is rather challenged by students' poignant critic of their present condition, which is a consequence of the historical engagement of their forefathers. The contradiction of patriotic ideals of freedom, belonging to a nation and the promise of a better future is counteracted by actual lack of opportunities, unemployment and social stagnation. The generation of social media, Internet and Google stands at odds with their embeddedness in the divided communities of their parents, reinforced by ideologically biased education system and dire economic circumstances.

The dissent from official scripts of patriotism and victimhood present in the narratives of 30 % of students is of utmost importance for this study. Crossing the boundaries of ethnicity, plunging from the security of one-dimensional stories into the ambiguity of complex, multiperspectival ones, is a truly remarkable alternative. It opens a door for questioning, dialogue, learning, empathy and possible acceptance of diversity that has at its core the idea that people cannot be considered of less value due to their ethnicity, color, gender or history. In the midst of the current EU crisis, the idea of European identity as a model of shared identity does not seem as tempting as before. It is rather the idea of the common humanity and the basic human need for freedom, recognition, empathy and peace that unite the members of human family.

What emerged from data is the realization that history learning is a communal process that requires dedicated and joint involvement of all relevant social levels and structures, from students, parents, teachers to ministry officials and civil society. History education can play a positive role in postconflict contexts only if tolerance, decentralization and multiperspectivity in history teaching and learning are allowed. It should be stressed that multiperspectivity and decentralization, as such, do not imply threat to someone's identity, but they rather signify the

possibility of choice and awareness that we may all be equally right or wrong. The value of the argument for equal treatment and joint exploration of historical narratives in postconflict education systems is in the very process that enables learning about tolerance, respect, civic values and freedom of choice. Integration and multiperspectivity does not mean either uniformity or fragmentation, but joint exploration of complexity of histories. For this process to be truly successful in societies that are trying to navigate their way out of the historical cycles of contention, it is necessary for people on the ground to own the process, to belong and believe in the possibility of truly integrated communities that will not be imposed from the outside but emerge from within.



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